

The Romantic fragment and the legitimation of philosophy: Platonic poems of reason¹

James Vigus

Although Friedrich Schlegel, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Giacomo Leopardi, three great Romantic fragment-writers in three different languages, all considered themselves philosophers, this status has traditionally been withheld from each of them. The reason for this, in a nutshell, is that the form of their writing is deeply unlike that of the canonical philosophers of their age, such as Kant or Hegel. For their lack of sustained, demonstrative arguments they have often been judged as superficial or confused. They have also suffered from the entirely unromantic division of disciplines in modern university departments, whereby Kant, for instance, is studied in Philosophy; Schlegel, Coleridge and Leopardi in three different departments of Literary Studies. One result of this division is that until recently, most commentaries on the fragment writers' philosophical work have come from literary scholars who – as Frederick Beiser has recently commented – are sometimes prone to judge an unsystematic approach to philosophy over-harshly owing to an anxious desire to prove the critic's own rigour of thought.² Another result of the academic division of labour is that it has been more difficult for Coleridge and Leopardi than for Schlegel to find acceptance as philosophers due to a widespread assumption that philosophy in this period is the province of *German* thinkers. Schlegel may moreover have achieved readier acceptance as a philosopher because he achieved little as a poet. (Nicholas Boyle characterises Schlegel beautifully as 'Coleridge without the poetry').³ For there is a prevailing sense that literary writers, especially poets, cannot possibly contribute to philosophy, since philosophy should result in knowledge, especially knowledge gained through logical argument; whereas poetry is the vehicle of something other than knowledge – whether pleasure, or power, or rhetorical impact.⁴ Most modern readers are by training unreceptive to suggestions such as that of

¹ I thank the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (Exzellenzinitiative) for funding the fellowship at the Department of English and American Studies, Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich, which made this research possible. All translations from German and Italian are my own.

² Frederick Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher: A Re-Examination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), p. 8.

³ Nicholas Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age, Volume II: Revolution and Renunciation* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), p. 398.

⁴ Thus Benedetto Croce's classic judgment on Leopardi's philosophy focuses on lack of systematicity: 'Ma per questa parte, che è quella filosoficamente fattiva, il Leopardi non offre se non sparse osservazioni, non approfondite e non sistemate: a lui mancava disposizione e preparazione speculativa': Benedetto Croce, *Poesia e non poesia* (Bari: Laterza, 1950), p. 99. The division continues to emerge in comments like this: 'While many of

Coleridge ‘that Poetry, even that of the loftiest, and, seemingly, that of the wildest odes, had a logic of its own, as severe as that of science’.⁵

In the case of Schlegel, however, recent decades have seen a shift in critical perspective, as a result of attention from influential philosophers including Dieter Henrich.⁶ Nowadays Schlegel’s philosophy has two eminent champions in Manfred Frank and Frederick Beiser, who have been able to draw on a critical edition that is endlessly approaching completion.⁷ The newly canonical status of Schlegel’s philosophy has recently been confirmed by an anthology of his writings on philosophy (no equivalent publication exists among the numerous anthologies of Coleridge).⁸ In this paper, I want first to explore some of the reasons for according the status of philosopher to Schlegel, and then to argue on similar grounds for an extension of this recognition to both Coleridge and Leopardi.

To forecast my argument: Schlegel’s contribution is now understood as twofold. First, he sceptically questioned the very foundations of philosophical method; and second, he enquired into the appropriate form of philosophical writing, successfully challenging the idea that a philosophical work should consist of a series of connected, deductive propositions. My suggestion is that something similar occurs in the fragmentary writings of the Englishman and the Italian. In all cases, the fragment form stems not primarily from disorganisation or disinclination to rigorous thought, but from discontent with the available philosophies, whether idealist-foundational or empiricist; a discontent that drives these writers to rethink the very form of philosophy by means of experimenting with it. With this idea in mind, I loosely define ‘fragmentary’ writing as any form that rejects the totalising impulse of a systematic

Leopardi’s philosophical ideas were current in his time, and thus not original to him, his poetry is at all times thoroughly innovative and unique’: Margaret Brose, ‘Ugo Foscolo and Giacomo Leopardi: Italy’s Classical Romantics’, in *A Companion to European Romanticism*, ed. by Michael Ferber (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 256-75 (p. 266). To the analytical tradition it has seemed that Coleridge is not a philosopher ‘in the technical sense’: Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (London, 1946, 1961), p. 740.

⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* [1817], ed. by James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983), I, 9.

⁶ Though even today, critics are divided over the question of whether Schlegel may be considered a philosopher, as Birgit Rehme-Iffert comments in *Skepsis und Enthusiasmus: Friedrich Schlegels philosophischer Grundgedanke zwischen 1796 und 1805* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001), p. 11.

⁷ Beiser maintains that his interpretation, which stresses the absolute idealist phase of Schlegel’s thought around 1804, differs considerably from Frank’s interpretation, which stresses Schlegel’s relativist critique of foundationalism in the 1790s: see *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard UP, 2003), pp. 4, 192n.8. For the state of play regarding the Schlegel edition, see Ulrich Breuer, Till Dembeck and Maren Jäger, ‘Zum Stand der Kritischen Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe’, in *Athenäum: Jahrbuch der Friedrich Schlegel Gesellschaft* 18 (2008), 165-182.

⁸ Friedrich Schlegel, *Schriften zur Kritischen Philosophie 1795-1805*, ed. by Andreas Arndt and Jure Zovko (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2007). Henceforth: *SKP*. When quoting from Schlegel’s works, I cite where possible both this edition and the collected edition under the abbreviation *KFSA*: Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Ausgabe seiner Werke*, ed. by Ernst Behler et. al (1958-).

architectonic – as, in other words, embodying a strong form of resistance to prevailing norms rather than a feeble collapse of argument. In the framework that I will sketch for this mutually supporting reevaluation, I will discuss the significance of an interest that Schlegel, Coleridge and Leopardi all have in common: this is the dialogue form of the ancient philosopher Plato.⁹ This common interest is no coincidence, since it was Plato who decisively problematised the relationship between philosophy and poetry. Plato himself could seem to stand on either side of this so-called ‘ancient quarrel’, being both the philosopher who banished poets from his Republic and the poet who composed in dialogue form. As the Romantic fragment-writers well knew, in Plato are the seeds of the judgment that would condemn their philosophical efforts: philosophy is systematic and not artistic. Yet they found a counter to this perspective in Plato, too: the validity and proper form of philosophy can only be enquired into by ‘poeticising wit’.¹⁰

Since Schlegel and Coleridge are exact coevals, immersed in similar sources, I will discuss them together, focusing initially on Schlegel and locating some points of affinity in Coleridge. Having outlined the dissatisfactions of contemporary philosophy as each of these two writers perceived them, and surveyed some of their Plato-conscious fragments in the light of these problems, I will suggest that similar impulses appear in a work by a writer of the next generation, the *Zibaldone di Pensieri* of Leopardi.

The 1790s, when Schlegel and Coleridge were in their twenties, was above all the decade of the critical philosophy, critique being the form of thought that Kant had recently instituted in his three great works. By the time of his philosophical fragments, however, Schlegel ridicules the prevalence of literal-minded Kantianism – a line of attack that Coleridge would in turn take up some years later.¹¹ The drawback to treating Kant’s works as the end rather than only

⁹ Cf. Frederick Beiser’s recognition of the ‘need for a Platonic interpretation of Schlegel’s philosophy’: *The Romantic Imperative*, p. 194 n.17, and chapter 4, ‘Frühromantik and the Platonic Tradition’, pp. 56-72; see further Beiser, *German Idealism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002), pp. 435-7, 454-461. (The previous key works on this topic are Bärbel Frischmann, ‘Friedrich Schlegels Platonrezeption und das hermeneutische Paradigma’, in *Athenäum: Jahrbuch für Romantik* 11 (2001), 71-92, and Hans Krämer, ‘Fichte, Schlegel und der Infinitismus in der Platondeutung’, *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 62 (1988), 583-621.) The possibility of pursuing such an interpretation with Leopardi and Coleridge in mind seems indicated by recent scholarship such as Franco D’Intino, *L’immagine della voce: Leopardi, Platone e il libro morale* (Venice: Marsilio, 2009) and James Vigus, *Platonic Coleridge* (London: Legenda, 2009).

¹⁰ See Schlegel’s exuberant formulation of this ideal in Athenäum-Fragment 116: *SKP* 69-70; *KFSA* II, 182-3.

¹¹ See e.g. Athenäum-Fragment 104; Ernst Behler, ‘Friedrich Schlegels Theorie des Verstehens: Hermeneutik oder Dekonstruktion?’, in *Die Aktualität der Frühromantik*, ed. by Ernst Behler and Jochen Hörisch (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1987), 141-160, pp. 146-7; and Manfred Frank, ‘Wechselgrundsatz: Friedrich Schlegels philosophischer Ausgangspunkt’, *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 50:1 (1996), 26-50, p. 28. Coleridge

the beginning of philosophy was pinpointed by Schlegel in a typically pregnant fragment: ‘Kant hat den Begriff des Negativen in die Weltweisheit eingeführt. Sollte es nicht ein nützlicher Versuch sein, nun auch den Begriff des Positiven in die Philosophie einzuführen?’¹² [Kant has introduced the concept of the negative into common philosophical discourse. Shouldn’t it now be useful to attempt to introduce the concept of the positive into philosophy, too?] Indeed, the negative conclusions of Kant’s thought had rapidly gained widespread acceptance.¹³ In particular, Kant had swept aside the disputes of traditional metaphysics through the demonstrations he provided in the section of the *Critique of Pure Reason* entitled ‘The Antinomy of Reason’. Here Kant shows that reason can equally correctly prove *and* disprove the traditional propositions that God exists, that the will is free, and so on.¹⁴ Kant’s radically sceptical conclusion was this: speculative reason inevitably posits ideas that turn out to be inaccessible to argument. Kant does of course proceed to a positive rebuilding of philosophy, but his critics considered this part of his project to be unsatisfactory. Kant argues that it is *morally* necessary to assume the propositions that we cannot *speculatively* prove. In the words of Henry Crabb Robinson, the leading English expounder of Kant at the turn of the century, ‘Kant entangled in the snares of speculative reason, has recourse to practical reason, & throws himself into the arms of faith.’¹⁵ As the terminology indicates, this line of argument rested on Kant’s distinctions between the various powers of the human mind, which even involved a division in the faculty of reason itself (speculative versus practical). Yet Kant still had to assume some unified transcendental perspective from which the whole project of critique could be launched in the first place. The attempts by Reinhold and Fichte to complete or correct the positive part of the Kantian philosophy focused on this latter aspect: in the early 1790s such thinkers developed Kant’s suggestion that consciousness of a transcendental ‘I’, an ‘I think’ (*Ich denke*) accompanies all our mental representations.¹⁶ It was Fichte in particular who tried to build a positive system

above all criticises the literalistic Kantianism of the historian of philosophy W.G. Tennemann: see Vigus, *Platonic Coleridge*, chapter 4, esp. p. 108.

¹² Athenäumsfragment 3: *KFSA* II, 166.

¹³ See Richard Kroner, *Von Kant bis Hegel*, 2 vols (Tübingen: J.C.C. Mohr, 1921, 1924), I, 364.

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* [1781, 1787], ed. and trans. by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), pp. 470-495.

¹⁵ Henry Crabb Robinson, ‘On the Philosophy of Schelling’, in *Essays on Kant, Schelling, and German Aesthetics*, ed. by James Vigus (London: MHRA, 2010), pp. 124-9 (p. 125). For Robinson’s translations of selected fragments of Friedrich Schlegel, see Diana I. Behler, ‘Henry Crabb Robinson as a Mediator of Early German Romanticism to England’, in *Arcadia: Zeitschrift für vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft* 12:2 (1977), 117-155.

¹⁶ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 249.

on a Kantian basis, to construct a system of philosophy based on one indubitable first principle, the 'I' that posits itself.

Schlegel studied Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* with great enthusiasm around 1795. However, he soon began to criticise Fichte's foundationalism, the doctrine just mentioned that philosophy must begin with a self-evident first principle and then derive a series of further propositions from it.¹⁷ Schlegel's objection was twofold. First, there is no such thing as a purely self-evident proposition. Any proposition can be doubted, and so must be demonstrated, but then the demonstration in turn must be demonstrated, leading to an infinite regress. Second, any proposition can be proved in infinite ways, so that our proofs are (so to speak) infinitely perfectible.¹⁸ Schlegel's conclusion is sceptical: 'Es gibt keine Grundsätze, die allgemein zweckmäßige Begleiter und Führer zur Wahrheit wären' [There are no first principles that are universally purposive companions and guides to truth].¹⁹ Schlegel thus detected an apparently fatal problem afflicting philosophy at its very root. Kant had provided a negative critique, but no positive scaffolding. Fichte's positive system based on a self-evident first principle ran into an infinite regress. This meant that philosophy conceived as a systematic edifice of propositions was now a scarcely justifiable endeavour. Schlegel thus ironically calls for a consistent, systematic scepticism: 'Es gibt noch keinen konsequenten σκ [Skeptizismus]; wohl d[er] Mühe werth, einen aufzustellen. σκ [Skeptizismus] = permanente Insurrektion' [There is still no consistent scepticism; surely it's worth the effort to set one up. Scepticism = permanent insurrection].²⁰ This is ironic because scepticism, conceived as a reactive, critical examination of philosophical propositions, can by definition never be 'set up' as a system. Schlegel's provocative insistence on the importance of scepticism is thus far from defining himself as a sceptic – for it is essential to establish something before the resistance movement of scepticism can emerge.²¹ So we *do* have to begin somewhere, rather than just deny what Schlegel regards as a fundamental motivation to thought, our 'Sehnsucht nach den

¹⁷ Manfred Frank, "'Wechselgrundsatz': Friedrich Schlegels philosophischer Ausgangspunkt", *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 50 (1996), 26-50 (p. 30); Beiser, *German Idealism*, pp. 437f.

¹⁸ For this summary I draw on Beiser, *German Idealism*, p. 444, who refers to *Philosophische Lehrjahre*, KFSa XVIII, 506 (no. 12) and 50 (no. 15).

¹⁹ *Philosophische Lehrjahre*, KFSa XVIII, 518 (no.13); cf. Beiser, *German Idealism*, p. 444.

²⁰ *Philosophische Lehrjahre*, KFSa XVIII, 12 (no. 94); cf. Frank, "'Wechselgrundsatz'", p. 31 n.19.

²¹ Cf. Athenäum-Fragment 97, *KFSa* II, 179: 'Als vorübergehender Zustand ist der Skeptizismus logische Insurrektion; als System ist er Anarchie. Skeptische Methode wäre also ungefähr wie insurgente Regierung.' [As a temporary condition, scepticism is logical insurrection; as a system it is anarchy. So sceptical method would be something like an insurgent government.] Schlegel may be referring ironically to Kant's profession of a 'sceptical method' in *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 468.

Unendlichen' [longing for the infinite] – but any point from which we try to begin requires a prior justification.²² In 1796 Schlegel begins to postulate that we must conceive not just one single foundational principle, but rather a plurality. With at least two such principles, it is possible to speak of an 'alternating ground', or *Wechselgrundsatz*. The problem of infinite regress, he notes, only applies to a philosophical system that sets out from one fundamental proposition. His revolutionary question was this: 'Wie wenn nun aber ein von außen unbedingter, gegenseitig aber bedingter und sich bedingender Wechselerweis der Grund der Philosophie wäre?' [But what if an alternating proof, unconditioned from without, yet reciprocally conditioned and self-conditioning, were the foundation of philosophy?].²³

Though Schlegel never explicitly developed the implications of this idea, it informs the irony of his philosophical fragments from around 1796.²⁴ For Schlegel, although the philosopher must strive for the infinite, the infinite remains perpetually out of reach. Progress, according to the model just sketched, occurs not in a straight line, but through a positing followed by the answering insurrection of scepticism. Some of Schlegel's fragments thus evoke the necessity of thinking in fragments in order to continue striving, fully aware that what we desire is a whole, not just the series of parts which is all that we actually achieve. In this sense he invokes the mathematical figure of the parabola:

Gibt es wohl ein schöneres Symbol für die Paradoxie des philosophischen Lebens, als jene krummen Linien, die mit sichtbarer Stetigkeit und Gesetzmäßigkeit forteilend immer nur in Bruchstück erscheinen können, weil ihr eines Zentrum in der Unendlichkeit liegt?²⁵

[Is there indeed a more beautiful symbol for the paradox of the philosophical life than those curved lines which, hurrying forward with visible endurance and regularity, can only ever appear in a fragment, because their one centre lies in infinity?]

The whole tendency of Schlegel's relativism is to problematize the form of philosophy, to enquire how such alternating fragments may be assembled in order to move the spirit along

²² See e.g. *KFSA* XII, 8; XXIII, 24.

²³ *SkP*, p. 47; *KFSA* II, 72. I follow Rehme-Iffert, pp. 31-39, and Beiser in locating the basis of Schlegel's concept of 'Wechselerweis' in his critique of Fichte.

²⁴ For the relationship of Schlegel's irony to Plato and Socrates, see Kathleen M. Wheeler, 'Socratic Irony and the Fragment Form in Friedrich Schlegel', in *Friedrich Schlegel und Friedrich Nietzsche: Transzendentalpoesie oder Dichtkunst mit Begriffen* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2009), 81-93.

²⁵ *Lessings Gedanken und Meinungen*, in *KFSA* II, 415.

progressive lines of thought. In other words, prevailing models of philosophical writing, such as the geometrical presentation favoured by Schelling, are inadequate to the whole problem of the very first step; and even Kant is, in Schlegel's opinion, at his best not in systematic demonstrations, but rather in his 'Winke und Andeutungen' - which may be translated with Coleridge's notorious description of Kant's practice, 'hints and insinuations'.²⁶ Schlegel thus sketched an ideal of what he called the 'symbolic form' of philosophy, which appears everywhere 'wo ein schwebender Wechsel der Gedanken in fortgehender Verknüpfung, d.h. überall, wo Philosophie stattfindet' [where a suspended alternation of thoughts in proceeding connection, i.e. wherever philosophy occurs].²⁷ Schlegel thus considers dialogue to be the most productive form of philosophy, and he identifies Lessing and Plato as respectively the modern and the ancient masters of this form. Even by 1805, when he had ceased composing fragments himself, Schlegel continued to uphold Plato's dialogues as exemplary of true philosophy, and it was Schlegel who encouraged his friend Schleiermacher to translate the complete Platonic dialogues. Schlegel displays a certain nostalgia for the vestige of orality in Plato, that form of discussion and thought furthest removed from the modern, written, demonstrative method: 'Das vorzüglichste, wirksamste Beförderungsmittel der Belehrung und Ueberzeugung, so wie der lebendigsten Entwicklung des *gemeinschaftlichen Selbstdenkens* schien ihm das mündliche Gespräch, wovon wir auch in seinen Werken vollendete, unübertreffliche Muster finden' [The most outstanding, most effective means of promoting learning and conviction, as well as the most lively development of *communal, independent thought* seemed to him to be the oral conversation, of which we also find in his works perfect, unsurpassable models].²⁸ But the fact that the Platonic dialogues are perfectly formed does not mean that they correspond to the modern ideal of a system beginning from one proposition and unfolding from there. Schlegel insists that Plato doesn't have a system in this sense. He delights in the fact that the Platonic dialogues tend to begin in the middle of a conversation, sometimes even with a retort against a principle that we must assume to have just been asserted by one of the interlocutors – again, with the insurgence of scepticism at work.²⁹ Schlegel dismisses the established hypothesis that Plato must have had an esoteric system not

²⁶ *KFSA* II, 112. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* I, 154.

²⁷ *KFSA* II 99-100f; also quoted VIII, xlvi.

²⁸ 'Philosophie des Plato', *SkP* 202; *KFSA* XII, 207.

²⁹ *Ibid*, *SkP* 204; *KFSA* XII, 209-10. Cf. Athenäum-Fragment 84 (*KFSA* II 178): 'Subjektiv betrachtet, fängt die Philosophie doch immer in der Mitte an, wie das epische Gedicht' [Subjectively considered, philosophy always begins in the middle, like the epic poem].

articulated in the dialogues with the explanation that Plato was aware that we necessarily always strive toward the infinite, but never arrive: ‘[...] daß aber die Dialoge nichts absolut Vollendetes liefern, liegt in der Natur der Sache, da Plato als durchaus progressiver Denker entweder mit seiner *Philosophie*, oder mit ihrer *Darstellung* nicht fertig geworden ist. Gegen das dogmatische, zum System eilende Streben ist gewiß der skeptische, allmählich bildende, vollendende Geist seiner Dialoge der fruchtbarste, lehrreichste Gegensatz’ [... but it belongs to the nature of this business that the dialogues deliver nothing absolutely complete, since Plato as a thoroughly progressive thinker has not finished either with his *philosophy* or with its *presentation*. Against the dogmatic effort to hurry to a system, the sceptical, gradually formative, completing spirit of his dialogues is certainly the most fruitful, most educative contrast].³⁰ In this way, Schlegel made a fragmentary, ironic, striving Plato in his own image.

Schlegel’s approach to philosophy in his early Romantic phase may now be characterised in two further, brief aphorisms. First, the best way to begin philosophy is to problematise philosophy itself (‘die φσ [Philosophie] selbst zum Problem zu machen ist der beste Anfang derselben’).³¹ This explains why Schlegel’s philosophical writing could not take, so to speak, a conventional form. And it is consistent with a second, famous aphorism: ‘Es ist gleich tödlich für den Geist, ein System zu haben, und keins zu haben. Er wird sich also wohl entschließen müssen, beides zu verbinden.’ [It is equally fatal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It must simply decide to combine both].³² On the one hand, if we were to give up all hope of a system, in other words of arriving by logical thought at the coveted ‘infinite’, the wisdom that the lover of wisdom hopes to attain, then our fragments would no longer be parts of a whole, ‘Bruchstücke’, and we would never even get underway; but on the other hand, as soon as we think we have constructed a system, our thought has become disastrously desiccated and immobile.³³

Samuel Taylor Coleridge effectively lived out Schlegel’s commandment that it is necessary both to have a system and not to have one. Over a much longer period than Schlegel, he scribbled fragmentary arguments and plans for poems and projects in his notebooks, and he

³⁰ *SkP* 207; *KFSA* XII, 212.

³¹ ‘Philosophische Lehrjahre’ V, 1053: *KFSA* XVIII, 408; also quoted in *KFSA* VIII, xliii.

³² Athanäumsfragment 53: *KFSA* II, 173.

³³ Schlegel’s continued interest in piecing together Plato’s non-systematic philosophy provides a good argument for a ‘continuity-thesis’ regarding his development, i.e. that his shifts from neoclassicism to early Romanticism to transcendental idealism do not constitute radical breaks.

covered the margins of philosophical books with notes that often implement the insurrection of sceptical reaction. Moreover, his published arguments, too, are usually fragmentary: Coleridge has a notorious habit of breaking off suddenly in moments of pregnant irony or hopeless confusion, depending on the perspective of the reader.³⁴ Even his crowning philosophical work, the *Opus Maximum*, finally pieced together from manuscripts and published in 2002, consists of a series of fragments – it is symptomatic that this work begins with ‘Chapter III’. Yet Coleridge, though he rarely concluded any project in the form he intended, continued to insist on the necessity of a system, and even announced in *Biographia Literaria* that his system is ‘no other than the system of Pythagoras and of Plato revived and purified from impure mixtures’.³⁵ This gap between his systematic claim and fragmentary presentation has attracted considerable criticism. I want to argue, however, that Coleridge’s predicament was similar to Schlegel’s, and that to recognise the similarities in his response is to begin to understand what Coleridge’s philosophy really achieved.³⁶

In the 1790s Coleridge set out by doubting the whole possibility of systematic philosophy. As he retrospectively described it:

After I had successively studied in the schools of Locke, Berkeley, Leibnitz, and Hartley, and could find in neither of them an abiding place for my reason, I began to ask myself: is a system of philosophy, as different from mere history and historic classification, possible?

He relates that he was disposed to answer this question ‘in the negative’, and ‘to admit that the sole practicable employment for the human mind was to observe, to collect, and to classify’.³⁷ As these verbs – observe, collect, classify – suggest, what had brought Coleridge to this crisis was essentially the empiricist conception of reason that dominated the British and French Enlightenment. As he intimates somewhat indirectly, he was shocked to discover that an empirical method cannot escape Humean scepticism about the principle of induction, and

³⁴ See especially Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Modalities of Fragmentation* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981).

³⁵ *Biographia Literaria* I, 263.

³⁶ As Paul Hamilton argues in *Coleridge and German Philosophy: The Poet in the Land of Logic* (London: Routledge, 2007), Coleridge is best regarded as a fully-fledged post-Kantian.

³⁷ *Biographia Literaria* I, 141; compare I, 200.

so will never arrive at any fixed or eternal truths.³⁸ This doubt was for Coleridge serious and persistent: even as late as 1818, in the midst of planning his Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Coleridge is still proposing to introduce young friends to the study of philosophy via the apparently open question, ‘Is Philosophy ... conceivable?’.³⁹ Elsewhere he frames this as a leading question: “Without Ideas is Philosophy, or a reduction of knowledge to ultimate Principles, possible? This may be answered negatively. It is not possible.”⁴⁰ So the enquiry about the possibility of philosophy becomes an enquiry about Ideas with a capital ‘I’, Ideas in a Platonic sense.

Coleridge’s ongoing doubt about the possibility of philosophy was essentially a crisis of reason.⁴¹ Like Schlegel, Coleridge absorbed and was convinced by Kant’s antinomies of reason. Also like Schlegel, however, he found the constructive part of Kant’s philosophy more problematic (and was for a long time inclined to follow Schelling in the assertion of an Absolute that we know directly by intellectual intuition). Further, Kant’s diagnosis of the impasse of speculative reason harmonized, from Coleridge’s perspective, with the arguments that Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi had put forward during the Pantheism Controversy of the 1780s. Jacobi had launched a polemic against Enlightenment reason, in which he claimed that the consistent use of reason results inevitably in nihilism, or what he termed Spinozism: the identification of God with the world.

Coleridge concurred with Jacobi’s diagnosis of the problem with Enlightenment reason, and Jacobi’s goal of reestablishing religious faith was also highly congenial to Coleridge. But the English writer objected to what he saw as Jacobi’s irrationalism, his declaration of faith in the teeth of the conclusions of reason. Coleridge’s ambivalent attitude to Jacobi is strikingly similar to that of Schlegel, who was drawn to Jacobi but attacked the latter’s apparent hatred of reason. In his 1796 review of Jacobi’s novel *Woldemar*, Schlegel on the one hand praises Jacobi’s negative work of critique as the necessary groundwork of a progressive, fragmentary philosophy:

³⁸ See James Vigus, ‘The Philosophy of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’, in *The Oxford Handbook of British Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by William Mander (Oxford: OUP, forthcoming).

³⁹ *The Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: OUP, 1956-71), IV, 847.

⁴⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Marginalia*, ed. by George Whalley and H.J. Jackson, 6 vols (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980-2001), V, 776, annotating W.G. Tennemann, *Geschichte der Philosophie*, 11 vols (Leipzig: Barth, 1798-1819).

⁴¹ The phrase is Richard Berkeley’s: *Coleridge and the Crisis of Reason* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007).

Der *polemische* Teil der Jakobischen Schriften hat großen philosophischen Werth: er hat die Lücken, die Folgen, den Unzusammenhang nicht bloß dieses oder jenes Systems, sondern auch der *herrschenden Denkart des Zeitalters* mit kritischem Geist, und mit der hinreißenden Beredsamkeit des gerechten Unwillens aufgedeckt.⁴²

[The *polemical* part of Jacobi's writings has great philosophical worth: he has revealed the gaps, the consequences, the disjointedness not just of this or that system, but also of the *dominant mentality of the age* with critical spirit and with the entrancing eloquence of just indignation.]

But on the other hand Jacobi has, in Schlegel's view, predetermined the goal to which philosophy ought to lead us, that is to love of God conceived as the infinite and the invisible. In Schlegel's view, Jacobi's attitude is like that of Romeo, who exclaims, 'Hang up philosophy! Unless philosophy can make a Juliet'. Since philosophy doesn't give Jacobi his Juliet, he turns against it, and leaps into the arms of faith. What is particularly interesting here is a point that Schlegel elsewhere makes explicitly: for all the undoubted contrast in their respective attitudes to reason,⁴³ both Jacobi and Kant finally make just such a leap of faith.⁴⁴

Coleridge, faced with a similar dilemma, likewise maintains the need to keep striving after truth (he defines philosophy as 'the affectionate seeking after truth'), while constantly examining the foundational principles from which we start. Like Schlegel, his most persistent model is Plato. Coleridge eventually reinterprets Kant's antinomies in terms of Plato's dialectic, and vice-versa. In Coleridge's view (thinking especially of *Parmenides*), Plato shows reasoned argument reaching two contradictory conclusions. This impasse leaves us with two possible solutions: either a Jacobi-like abandonment of philosophy, which in turn results either in radical scepticism or its polar opposite, an irrational faith; or, what Coleridge's Plato really wants to direct us to, a so-called 'higher logic' that we may apprehend by intellectual intuition:

⁴² *SkP* 47. *KFSA* II, 71. Recent scholarship has tended to downplay the distance between early Romanticism and *Aufklärung*, but Schlegel's sympathy with the negative part of Jacobi's critique tends to support Beiser's recent argument that 'there still seems to be a profound difference between *Frühromantik* and *Aufklärung* regarding the authority of reason': *The Romantic Imperative*, p. 57.

⁴³ This contrast is noted by Schlegel in his review of F.H. Jacobi's *Woldemar*: *SkP* 5; *KFSA* II, 75. In the same review, Schlegel diagnoses Jacobi's 'hatred' of reason.

⁴⁴ Cf. Ernst Behler's introduction to *KFSA* VIII, xxx-xxxii.

The inference is evident, though Plato commonly leaves it to his reader's own reflexion: namely, either that all reasoning is a mere illusion, and that the simplest noticing and recording of phaenomena, with the art of arranging the same for the purposes of more easy recollection, constitutes the whole of human knowledge and the sole legitimate object of the human intellect, or there must exist a class of truths to which the measures of time and space and the forms of quantity, quality, and contingent relation are not applicable.⁴⁵

Somewhat like Schlegel, Coleridge thus constructs Plato as a poetic philosopher, whose fragmentary intimations of a higher realm of truth are designed not to dispense with logical reasoning, but to elevate it to a higher level. Like Schlegel, Coleridge makes Plato in his own image. A superficial difference between the two is that whereas Schlegel is scornful of the notion that Plato may have maintained a complete system in esoteric or unwritten form, Coleridge considers this to be almost certainly the case. But this difference is principally one of philosophical temperament rather than any radical divergence of attitude to Plato or to the aims and methods of philosophy. Given his religious commitments, Coleridge needs to believe that, on some level, Plato's fragmentary, dialogical provocations really did add up to a complete, sublime network of propositions – in other words, that philosophy ultimately can transport us to the infinite or absolute principle towards which we are striving. Schlegel, on the other hand, is more ready to admit that the infinite is a purely regulative, strictly unrealizable idea. However, both these Romantic writers have in common an attraction to the ancient world in general and to Plato in particular as holding out a promise of wholeness, yet actually appearing in fragments which research must laboriously piece together.⁴⁶

Further, Coleridge's explanation and justification of the idealism of Plato, focusing clearly on the notion of striving, and on the competition between poetic and philosophical forms of presentation, is entirely compatible with Schlegel's approach:

⁴⁵ *Opus Maximum*, ed. by Thomas McFarland with the assistance of Nicholas Halmi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 185, quoted and discussed in Vigus, *Platonic Coleridge*, p. 152.

⁴⁶ In his introduction to *Die Griechen und Römer*, Schlegel argues that we can no longer imitate the wholeness of the ancients; the more we strive, the more fragmentary our production becomes (*KFSA* I, 206f.). For further similarities in Schlegel's and Coleridge's ideas of endless striving, see James Vigus, "Transzendentalpoesie" bei Friedrich Schlegel im Vergleich zum Begriff "Philosophic Poem" bei Coleridge', in *Friedrich Schlegel und Friedrich Nietzsche: Transzendentalpoesie oder Dichtkunst mit Begriffen*, ed. by Klaus Vieweg (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2009), 133-143.

For Plato was a poet of such excellence as would have stood all other competition but that of his being a philosopher. His poetic genius imported in him those deep impressions and the love of them which, mocking all comparison with after objects, leaves behind it thirst for something not attained, to which nothing in life is found commensurate and which still impels the soul to pursue.⁴⁷

This passage provides one small indication of Coleridge's anxious interest in the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy as Plato presented it.⁴⁸ It is consistent with the legend that Plato began as a poet, but then put poetry behind him in favour of philosophy – just as Coleridge himself, equally implausibly, claimed to have done. For Coleridge, Plato stands for a poetic approach to philosophy conveyed in beautiful fragments, but also for the reproach that such a method often attracts, that poets lack the proper rigor of philosophers.

The passage just quoted, which communicates Coleridge's essential vision of Plato's philosophy and of his own, also expresses a certain sense of disappointment in real objects, which never correspond to our ideals. This nostalgic strain in Coleridge provides a ready transition to a brief consideration of Leopardi's fragmentary comments on the possibility of philosophy and on Plato in his *Zibaldone*.⁴⁹ Leopardi's disillusionment with philosophy as he knew it rested on different sources from that of Schlegel and Coleridge, yet reflected a comparable perspective. Leopardi would have known some information about Kant and Jacobi at least from his reading of Madame de Staël's work *De l'Allemagne*,⁵⁰ but in *Zibaldone* he refers to Kant only as an example of the present-day delusion of system-

⁴⁷ *Lectures 1818-1819 on the History of Philosophy*, ed. by J.R. de J. Jackson, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995), I, 183. Cf. Vigus, *Platonic Coleridge*, p. 100. Charlie Lowth, 'Coleridge und Friedrich Schlegel als Lessing-Leser', in *Zwischen Aufklärung und Romantik: Neue Perspektiven der Forschung*, ed. by Konrad Feilchenfeldt (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006), pp. 150-164, argues that whereas Schlegel romanticizes Lessing in general remarks, Coleridge immerses himself in the theological detail of Lessing, a difference said to reflect a broader divergence between German and English Romanticism (p. 162). And yet Schlegel's romanticized Lessing bears a remarkable resemblance to Coleridge's romanticized Plato.

⁴⁸ See Vigus, *Platonic Coleridge*, chapter 3.

⁴⁹ On the agony of unfulfilled genius in Coleridge and Leopardi, see Franco D'Intino, 'Coleridge – Leopardi: per una poesia potenziale?', in *La questione romantica* I:1 (Autumn 1995), 93-107. For further comparisons see Franco D'Intino, 'Metafisica della rilettura: Leopardi, Coleridge e la "Essential Poetry"', in *Leopardi e l'età romantica*, ed. by Mario Andrea Rigoni (Venice: Marsilio, 1999), pp. 371-82; and Wanda Marra, 'Coleridge e Leopardi: soggettività ed esperienza della frammentazione', *La questione romantica* I:1 (Autumn 1995), 383-96.

⁵⁰ As Volker Steinkamp, *Giacomo Leopardis 'Zibaldone': Von der Kritik der Aufklärung zu einer 'Philosophie des Scheins'* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1991) notes (p. 41), it is difficult to date Leopardi's first reading of *De l'Allemagne*, but he first mentions it in November 1820 (*Zibaldone* 350). I quote the *Zibaldone* from Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, ed. by Fiorenza Cregioli and Monica Ballerini, CD Rom (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2009), which includes the standard pagination.

building, the disastrous ‘amor de’ sistemi’.⁵¹ German philosophical ‘sistemi e romanzi’ [systems and fictions] – a telling juxtaposition – represent for Leopardi primarily a symptom of the fact that Enlightenment philosophy has relentlessly destroyed the imaginative illusions that once sustained happiness in human life.⁵² Thus Leopardi’s view of the self-destructiveness of philosophy as hitherto practiced echoes the questions of Schlegel and Coleridge as to the whole possibility of a constructive philosophy. ‘Mi sono intimamente convinto che la pura ragione umana, secondo un bel detto dello stesso Bayle, è uno strumento di distruzione e non di edificazione’ [I have deeply convinced myself that mere human reason, as Bayle himself fittingly put it, is an instrument of destruction and not of edification].⁵³ Hence emerges, again, a principle of radical scepticism: ‘l’ultima conclusione che si ricava dalla filosofia vera e perfetta, si è, che non bisogna filosofare’ [the ultimate conclusion we draw from true and perfect philosophy is that we must not philosophize].⁵⁴ Like Schlegel, Leopardi speaks ironically of a ‘system’ of scepticism as a necessary, perpetual insurgence: ‘Il mio sistema introduce non solo uno Scetticismo ragionato e dimostrato, ma tale che, secondo il mio sistema, la ragione umana per qualsivoglia progresso possibile, non potrà mai spogliarsi di questo scetticismo’ [My system introduces not only a reasoned and demonstrated scepticism, but such a scepticism that, according to my system, human reason, regardless of any possible progress, will never be able to get rid of].⁵⁵ Yet Leopardi is another writer who lives out Schlegel’s dictum that it is necessary both to have a system and not to have a system. No sooner has he condemned the love of system than he asserts that all people who think for themselves have to adopt a system.⁵⁶

⁵¹ *Zibaldone* 945.

⁵² Leopardi, ‘Discorso sopra lo Stato presente dei Costumi degl’Italiani’, in *Giacomo Leopardi – Opere. La Letteratura italiana. Storia e testi*, vol. I (Milano and Napoli: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1982), pp. 854-877 (p. 875). See further Geir Sigurdsson, ‘In Praise of Illusions: Giacomo Leopardi’s Ultraphilosophy’, in *Nordicum-Mediterraneum: Icelandic E-Journal of Nordic and Mediterranean Studies* 5:1 (March 2010): <http://nome.unak.is/joomla/index.php/5-1/2-articles51/217-in-praise-of-illusions-giacomo-leopardis-ultraphilosophy> (accessed 25 November 2010), esp. p. 9.

⁵³ Leopardi to Karl Bunsen, 3 Aug 1825, quoted in Franco D’Intino, *L’immagine della voce*, p. 85.

⁵⁴ Giacomo Leopardi, ‘Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro’, *Operette morali* (Milano: Garzanti, 1984), p. 269.

⁵⁵ *Zibaldone* 1655, 8 September 1821.

⁵⁶ *Zibaldone* 945 (see further 946-9). In Steinkamp’s helpful review of the question of systematicity (*Giacomo Leopardi’s ‘Zibaldone’*, pp. 29-30), he draws a contrast with Schlegel, claiming that the critique of dogmatic system-building is not, in Leopardi, connected with a theory of fragmentary or aphoristic thought, because Leopardi continues to refer to his ‘system’ (*Zibaldone* 393, 416, 1562, 1642, 1655, 1791, 3927, 4185). I would argue, on the contrary, that the *Zibaldone* may be profitably interpreted in the light of Schlegel’s distinction between works with no connection of thought that are venerated with an appearance of unity, and genuinely connected works that are presented in fragments (*KFSA* II, 159).

However, Leopardi does not resort to a Jacobi-like disparagement of reason, and his objections to philosophy are objections to above all to current practice.⁵⁷ Leopardi's hints about other possible forms of philosophy, whether a 'mezzafilosofia' or an 'oltrafilosofia' that may combine thought and action, reflect the fact that his fragments are designed to explore the appropriate form of philosophical writing.⁵⁸ For Leopardi, the fragment form, where a fragment is considered as an intimate part of some projected whole, embodies a rebellion against the systematic disconnection practiced by Enlightenment reason.

Leopardi's intense reading of Plato in 1823 evidently contributed to these reflections.⁵⁹ His deep ambivalence about Plato reflects precisely the issue that I have attempted to highlight in this paper. He declares that the Platonic ideas, posited by means of rational dialectic, are 'false e insussistenti',⁶⁰ and that Plato's theory is only superior to modern belief in the Absolute by virtue of its consistency. On the other hand, Plato stands for Leopardi's ideal of poeticizing philosophy:

[...] si osservi che i più profondi filosofi, i più penetranti indagatori del vero, e quelli di più vasto colpo d'occhio, furono espressamente notabili e singolari anche per la facoltà dell'immaginazione e del cuore, si distinsero per una vena e per un genio decisamente poetico [...] Fra gli antichi Platone, il più profondo, più vasto, più sublime filosofo di tutti essi antichi che ardì concepire un sistema il quale abbracciasse tutta l'esistenza, e rendesse ragione di tutta la natura, fu nel suo stile e nelle sue invenzioni ec. così poeta come tutti sanno.⁶¹

[...] one notes that the most profound philosophers, the most penetrating investigators of truth, and those with the widest overview, were evidently notable and outstanding also for the faculty of imagination and of the heart, they distinguished themselves for a vein and a genius definitely poetic [...] Among the ancients Plato, the most profound, the most capacious, most sublime philosopher of all antiquity who dared to conceive a system which would encompass the whole of existence, and would account for the whole of nature, was in his style and in his inventions, etc., the poet everyone knows.]

⁵⁷ Cf. Steinkamp, *Giacomo Leopardi's 'Zibaldone'*, p. 162.

⁵⁸ For 'mezzafilosofia', see *Zibaldone* 520-1, 1078, 1793; for 'oltrafilosofia', *Zibaldone* 115.

⁵⁹ For details of Leopardi's reading of Plato, see Sebastiano Timpanaro, *La filologia di Giacomo Leopardi*, 3rd edition (Florence: Laterza, 1997), pp. 103 and f.

⁶⁰ *Zibaldone* 1714, 16 September 1821.

⁶¹ *Zibaldone* 3245, 23 August 1823.

Thus as Franco D'Intino has recently pointed out, Leopardi objects powerfully to Plato as a dialectician, in the sense of a philosopher who glorifies logical reasoning, yet he responds sympathetically to a visionary, inspired, poetic Plato.⁶² (Sometimes Leopardi frames this opposition as Plato versus Socrates.) Perhaps alluding to the legend I mentioned above, that Plato was initially a poet, but then abandoned poetry in favour of philosophy, Leopardi sometimes remarks that he himself underwent a conversion from poetry to philosophy in the year 1819.⁶³ This self-interpretation appears puzzling given that many of his greatest poems, not to mention poetic fragments, were composed after that date. Yet the conversion story may perhaps be seen as an ironic myth, neatly reflecting the old Platonic dilemma, the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy.

Having composed private *Zibaldone* for some time, it was in the years 1824-1826 – a period of continued engagement with Plato – that Leopardi wrote the *Operette morali* for publication. This work, largely consisting of brief sketches in dialogue form, represents the practical outcome of Leopardi's celebration of orality, an attitude which again evinces an affinity with both Schlegel and Coleridge. Such dialogues, which may remind us of Schlegel's remark that Plato's works characteristically begin in mid-conversation, approach as closely as possible to Plato's original mode of sceptical and post-sceptical philosophising.

Conclusion:

The material I have assembled reflects the fact that, in Christoph Bode's words, 'even where there were no direct contacts whatsoever and no relationships to speak of, individual European [Romantic] writers came up with surprisingly similar solutions to the political, poetical, and philosophical problems that defined the era.'⁶⁴ I have suggested that Schlegel, Coleridge and Leopardi, three writers with similar interests who nevertheless had little contact with each other, have often been denied the status of philosophers because they think in

⁶² *L'immagine della voce*, p. 13. D'Intino thus mediates convincingly (cf. p. 102 and n. 48) between those critics who regard Leopardi as a Platonist, and those who protest that he is an anti-Platonist. The latter camp includes Giovanni Carsaniga in his compelling account of Leopardi's thought, *Giacomo Leopardi: The Unheeded Voice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1977), p. 58; but cf. the analysis of Mario Andrea Rigoni, *Il Pensiero di Leopardi* (Milan, 1997), p. 60: '[...] l'interesse di Leopardi nei confronti di Platone non è solo poetico e artistico, ma anche intellettuale e, più precisamente, filosofico [...] Leopardi è, se così si può dire, antiplatonico e platonico contemporaneamente su entrambi i piani.'

⁶³ See e.g. *Zibaldone* 144, 1 July 1820.

⁶⁴ Christoph Bode, 'Europe', in *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide*, ed. by Nicholas Roe (Oxford: OUP, 2005), pp. 126-136 (p. 127).

fragments. My argument against this judgment is that the crisis of reason, whether in the form of Kant's antinomies, Jacobi's anti-Enlightenment polemic or the perceived desiccation of the French encyclopaedists, made it impossible for these writers to pursue the contemporary ideal of a systematic edifice of philosophical propositions based on some one foundational certainty. As a result, they problematized and experimented with the form of philosophy, composing fragments usually conceived as 'Bruchstücke', or parts broken off from a projected whole. In this endeavour they naturally looked to Plato, whose importance for the form of philosophy was twofold: first, Plato instituted the so-called ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy that continues to inform this Romantic striving; and second, he teased his Romantic readers with the possibility of a total, complete and dialectically established philosophical theory, which nevertheless emerged only in dialogue, in discourses begun in mid-conversation, and not in the illusory security of a self-evident grounding proposition. In Leopardi's view, system-builders such as Kant only succeed in unconsciously creating 'poemi della ragione' [poems of reason], which constitute an admission of defeat.⁶⁵ But Leopardi, Coleridge and Schlegel all consciously compose poems of reason, poems that may succeed in saving philosophy from itself.

⁶⁵ *Zibaldone*, 2616, 30 August 1822.